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ABSTRACT

Probably no facet of American higher education has received less serious evaluation and study than small and/or rural two-year colleges. Though the work of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Task Force of Small/Rural Community Colleges (particularly on the themes of finance and communication of information) is a helpful beginning, a full-scale study remains to be done. Emphasis specifically on aspects of small junior colleges is crucial whether one defines "small" as 2,000 students (comprising more than 42% of two-year colleges in the U.S.) or 1,000 students (more than 31%). Until an exhaustive study appears in print, these suggestions may be appropriate: (1) regional meetings to address topics relevant to small/rural colleges; (2) a newsletter for smaller institutions; (3) priority lists developed through questionnaires of topics to be dealt with; (4) position paper/area subdivision projects (for example, continuing education, tapping private business resources, resource pooling, data collection, professional growth and development, minimum standard guidelines); and (5) increased representation in affairs of junior college organizations that study issues and problems that affect small or rural institutions. (RS)

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# Reflections of A Country Doctor: Or, A Ph.D. At A Rural Junior College

by
Robert W. Dubay

1977

Psychologists, sociologists and other professionals who study human behavior for a livelihood have long recognized the existence of a relative variable called environment. While the extent to which environment plays a role in individual behavior patterns is assuredly a topic for debate, the truth is that environmental factors are very real and important considerations when it comes to developing and sustaining quality educational systems. This is especially apparent to teachers and administrators who are associated with small or rural (sometimes one in the same) two year colleges.

More than likely many of us who presently work at junior colleges did not necessarily begin our careers with a driving compulsion to do so. Instead, time, circumstance, opportunity, or personal identification with the goals and objectives of such institutions led us in this direction. On the other hand, in view of the less than bountiful employment market, some of us may have entered the two year atmosphere for something less than idealistic reasons. Still others may have fallen into orbit out of sheer accident or good fortune, depending on one's frame of reference.

What some of us have discovered by way of first-hand experience during our affiliation with small junior colleges, in particular, might perhaps best lend itself more to good fiction than anything else. The stories we could tell about such things are eye-opening and often humorous, to say the least. But there are, I believe, lessons to be learned from sharing such tales, and a certain amount of applied relevance as well.

The odds are that most of us, regardless of heritage, birthplace or early schooling, spent several years in a senior college or university in order to

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complete our formal academic training. Needless to say, those years left some sort of imprint and also served to help formulate impressions of what the "real world" beyond our cloistered, ivy-covered graduate school habitat was like.

Throughout these years we diligently read the appropriate books, intently listened to our mentors, and eventually saw visions of ourselves riding out of College Hall atop our faithful sheepskin with every intention of making use of our store-bought knowledge by bringing some sort of contribution to mainstream of American higher education. For if we held our unsoiled Ph.D. banners far enough aloft, it was estimated, then we would surely dazzle and impress someone at one of the prestigous colleges and universities enough to be offered meaningful and rewarding employment. But in short order we discovered that there were already a vast number of banners on the field of honor and that the hallowed ground was so well occupied that it did not even allow one to get his banner fully unfurled.

No matter, one could always investigate the semi-hallowed ground of the junior college, at least temporarily. No harm in that. We still possessed something of service and could assist in the cause of informing the populace. After all, we still had the primary weapon in our arsenal of knowledge--behavioral objectives. Besides, we also had backup systems comprised of quantitative and qualitative analysis, operational modes, a commitment to innovation, and a firm grasp of knowing how to be accountable.

After a respectable period of suitable effort-making I had the good fortune of being selected an administrator of a two year college. Once the euphoria of wearing a label subsided, which wasn't long, the first thing I became aware of was that my new environment seemed to run contrary to what my college books and professors had indicated. It did not take a genius to realize that I was not at Miami-Dade, Florida Junior College, Nassau Community College, Macomb County

Community College or Orange Coast College. Shucks, I wasn't even part of the Cuyahoga Community College District. In short, most of what I had been taught or learned related more to the realm of the atypical. I felt downright disturbed.

A second feature of my newly acquired post likewise related to environment and its subsequent cultural byproducts. Quite frankly, both the latter and the former took some getting used to. I think the proper term is adaptation. A few examples are perhaps in order at this juncture. For instance, it was quite a while before I learned that "over yonder" meant somewhere between one hundred feet and five miles; that "hey" was a friendly greeting, not something you feed an animal; that "Big Boy" was a tomato plant and not a sandwich in a food chain restaurant; and that "you all" was singular as well as plural. Beyond a doubt the most difficult things to adjust to were the realization that the initials "M.F.," so prominently displayed on men's caps, stood for Massie Ferguson Farm Implements; and that "HI" was not a form of greeting but a logo for International Harvestor trucks and tractors. But there were redeeming moments. The people often spoke of "J.C." Naturally I assumed they were religious, being baptist and methodist or whatever. When that was not the case I became convinced that the initials were local shorthand for Junior College. But alas, the good citizens, I learned quite by accident, were referring to a prominent political personality.

Most of us identified with what is often referred to as the junior/community college movement are at least vaguely aware of the fact that beyond a given point it is difficult, if not impossible, to generalize concerning such institutions. The plain fact is that when role and scope, funding resources and enrollment, governance and organizational structure, and geographic location are taken into account the inescapable conclusion is that two year colleges are far less homogenous than they might appear to be.

This is not to imply that similarities are nonexistent or of no consequence. Quite the contrary. One need only examine services, educational philosophies and

curricula content to construct a strong case for parallelism. Nevertheless, in an era of self-evaluation and assessment a more comprehensive analysis of differences between and among two year colleges would appear desirable. For the data gleaned from such research may have wider-reaching implications other than the immediacy of a given context or situation.

It goes without saying that two year colleges differ markedly when it comes to purpose and function. But probably no facet of American higher education has received less serious evaluation and study, let alone concern, than small, often rural, junior colleges, institutes, technical colleges, community colleges--call them what you will. Happily, however, this unfortunate state of affairs is in the process of being rectified, at least in preliminary fashion, by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Task Force of Small/Rural Community Colleges.

In December, 1976, the six-member Task Force released its preliminary findings in a series of brief, but informative, position papers. Although several topics were singled out for emphasis, the reports dealt heavily with two themes; namely, financing and communication of information.

Considering the contemporary state of uncertain funding arrangements and practices it is understandable that this issue should receive maximum focus and concern. However, other aspects of the small two year college dilemma also need to be weighed and evaluated, then disseminated.

At the outset of the forthcoming summary remarks I would like to make a few points very clear. First, the members of the Task Force are to be applauded for devoting their time and energy to this long overdue and highly worthwhile project. Second, my remaining comments are in no way intended to impugn their work or judgment; rather, in the absence of a full scale study, which remains to be done, time still permits room for alternative suggestions and observations.

In the first place, I am not exactly certain as to what constitutes a "small" junior college. "Rural," of course, speaks for itself; but even so, it too is subject to personal interpretation. While various agencies and organizations might select a figure of 2,000 students, my own benchmark would define the figure at 1,000 or below. If the latter number is used we are talking about no less than 375 public and private institutions, or about 31.4 per cent of two year colleges in the United States. When 2,000 and below reference point is utilized the following prevails: 521 institutions, or 42.3 per cent. Clearly, no matter how you slice it, there is cause for concern.

The dominant question of economics aside, a vital element remains that of what to do in the here and now. Rather than wait for an exhaustive study to appear in print it seems to me that some of the following may be appropriate:

1. A series of AACJC sponsored regional meetings for the purpose of addressing such topics as are relevant to the small/rural college setting.

2. The establishment of a newsletter and circulation of information deemed of interest to smaller institutions.

3. The development through questionaires of a priority list of subjects to be dealt with as defined by goals and objectives.

4. Implementation of position paper/area subdivision projects pertaining to such items as continuing education, how to tap private business resources, regional pooling of resources, success/failure data collection at individual institutions, professional growth and development at small two year colleges, and guidelines for minimum standards at this type institution.

5. Participation arrangements should be made for increased representation in the affairs of junior college organizations that deliberate and study issues and problems affecting the small or rural institution. Somehow it is difficult to believe that a six-member Task Force representing institutions that have an average

enrollment of 2,000 students is the best possible combination to weigh and evaluate the complex set of difficulties besetting America's small two year colleges.

In the last analysis a few reflections are perhaps in order. Regardless of size or environment financial considerations are no stranger to any college these days. What is perhaps most needed in the immediate future is a commitment to identifying and resolving some of the other day to day problems. In my view this can best be accomplished by sharing information and ideas. I, for one, am a little weary of attending meetings and conferences that are concerned with issues that have slight, if any, relevance to the context with which I am associated. This does not mean that larger institutions do not have greater per capita worries, nor am I implying that undue attention should be focused on smaller schools. Instead, the point is simply this: at least a third of America's two year colleges may have special and unique concerns. These should be articulated. In so doing, two things may emerge as being valid: (1) a greater appreciation of the junior college movement as a whole; and (2) the possibility that an exchange of thinking may result in a modification of specific ideas to a given environment. I think they call this adapting. In our business the first prerequisite is generate a sense of place. Without an awareness of where we are, where we are going, and what our options are, we are something less than effective.